

Mentors, Coaches, Administrators: Catalysts for School Improvement

By Ellen B. Eisenberg



About the Author: Ellen B. Eisenberg is the executive director of the Pennsylvania Institute for Instructional Coaching (PIIC). Supported by the Annenberg Foundation and working in partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Education, PIIC builds on the work of the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative (PAHSCI) as a statewide resource for developing and supporting the delivery of consistent, high-quality professional development around instructional coaching and mentoring in Pennsylvania schools.

In addition, she was the executive director of the PAHSCI from 2005-2009. Funded by the Annenberg Foundation, it was the nation's only multi-tiered teacher coaching initiative, providing trained teacher-leaders called coaches, to high schools across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Ms. Eisenberg has spent her entire professional career in the field of public education. She began teaching English and reading in 1973 and has taught grades 7 through 12, all levels from at-risk to advanced placement.

"We are a catalyst for change for the entire school." ~PA instructional coach

Instructional coaching is spreading across Pennsylvania—and not just as a way to help teachers improve their practice. Coaching is part of a whole-school improvement strategy that fosters collaborative problem-solving and offers highly targeted professional development embedded in teachers' daily work. The goal: improved student achievement through changes in instructional practices. This goal cannot be achieved, however, without the help and support of school and district administrators.

The Pennsylvania Institute for Instructional Coaching (PIIC) is now working through 10 intermediate units (IUs) and two individual school districts across the state to support instructional coaching and instructional mentoring.¹ PIIC relies on a research-based literacy instructional model; ongoing professional development for coaches, teachers and administrators; and one-on-one mentoring that guides the coaching process in schools and districts.

Each participating IU has an instructional mentor. Mentors work with PIIC, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, IU executive directors, curriculum coordinators and coaches to analyze school data and identify teaching and learning needs to be addressed in the school improvement planning process. They help determine professional development priorities and co-create a plan to meet those needs. They also regularly visit schools to consult with school leaders and help build collaborative environments.

Mentors are the linchpin of PIIC's instructional coaching approach. Hired and deployed to schools and districts by IUs, mentors play many roles.² They serve as "the coaches' coach" to support coaches working with teachers. Most importantly, perhaps, they ensure the provision of ongoing, job-embedded professional development for teachers and other school staff that responds to the needs of practitioners in their schools.

PIIC supports and advocates a coaching model linked to state standards, curriculum and assessment.³ Using evidence-based strategies for strengthening instruction, coaches provide practical, classroom-focused assistance that is confidential, non-evaluative and non-threatening, enabling teachers to collaborate and work honestly and freely on self-improvement. Mentors help foster this collaborative environment, so that strategies may be shared across the school and a culture of continuous improvement emerges.

Mentors are highly experienced educators chosen for their special abilities to work collaboratively, to inspire trust among colleagues and to provide organizational and instructional support to schools and districts. They work one-on-one with coaches, providing feedback and guidance, supplying resources and materials and helping to plan and/or facilitate professional development tied to standards, teacher practices and research. Mentors also help coaches analyze their school's needs and reflect on their own coaching.

In partnership with the IUs, PIIC provides guidance, ongoing professional development and resources for instructional mentors. Along with the IU executive director, PIIC's executive team provides oversight of the IU mentoring and instructional coaching programs. PIIC offers a program of study for mentors, coaches and school leaders. Topics include but are not limited to: components

Continued on next page

of instructional coaching, designing effective school-wide professional development and using formative and summative data to guide instruction. School leaders and coaches co-facilitate several of PIIC's professional learning sessions.

Why are instructional mentors so important? Research shows that ongoing follow-up to teacher professional development increases the implementation of new strategies in the classroom. Jim Knight and his researchers at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning have found that 85 percent of teachers implement new strategies in their classrooms when given follow-up assistance after professional development; without follow-up, that figure drops to 10 percent.⁴ Mentors offer not only the highly targeted professional development coaches and teachers need, they also provide this crucial ongoing follow-up, creating the feedback loop and reflective practices necessary for continuous improvement.

Moreover, it's easier and more cost-effective to solve instructional problems as they surface and to encourage the integration of new strategies and approaches throughout a school. Mentors facilitate this process. They analyze school data, devise appropriate responses to instructional needs and support coaches. They also offer timely, "over-the-shoulder" help to teachers and promote collaboration across the school so that good ideas and practices are shared. Instructional coaching will be sustainable only insofar as it is institutionalized, and the IU mentors are the institutional bedrock for coaching in Pennsylvania. Providing relevant job-embedded professional development instead

of the typical "drop-in" professional development ensures continuing conversation about student work and ways to boost student achievement.

PIIC evolved from the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative (PAHSCI), which worked from 2005-2009 to support instructional coaching in 24 high schools in 16 high-need districts across the state. Like PAHSCI, PIIC is committed to research and evaluation, so that "what works" is well understood, and changes can be made to what doesn't work. PAHSCI surveyed instructional coaches and found:⁵

- Administrators and coaches noted "substantially increased student engagement" in their schools;
- Mentors played significant roles in helping school leaders remove obstacles to the implementation of instructional coaching;
- Mentors shared strategies and resources to help strengthen the coaches' capacity for improving instruction and their skills as coaches; and
- Mentors promoted the effective use of instructional strategies and data to provide consistency in instruction.

The ultimate goal of instructional mentoring and coaching, of course, is improved student achievement. In a teacher survey, 91 percent of teachers who were coached regularly said that coaches helped them use new teaching strategies, and 79 percent said that their coach played a significant role in improving their classroom instruction. Research on student achievement in schools

*Support from
school leaders
is essential
for instructional
coaching to succeed.*

with coaches is promising. On the Pennsylvania System of Student Assessment (PSSA) tests, 18 of 21 PAHSCI schools with data for 2004 and 2007 exceeded the state percentage change in the proportion of students reaching advanced or proficient levels in math; over that same period, 15 of 21 PAHSCI schools exceeded the state percentage change in the proportion of students reaching advanced or proficient levels in reading.⁶ Mentors study coaches practicing their craft and offer constructive feedback to improve coaching practices.

Support from school leaders is essential for instructional coaching to succeed. The work of both PAHSCI and PIIC has shown that the following are some of the most significant ways school leaders can support instructional coaching as an effective strategy for school improvement.

Begin with the end in mind. Build a professional learning community based on a shared understanding and commitment to student learning. A professional learning community is a collegial group of

administrators and school staff who are united in their commitment to student learning. Instructional coaches help determine the issues around teaching and learning and help create the interventions essential to achieving those goals.

Build a partnership. Coaches are the catalyst for learning among staff members. Teachers and coaches are collaborators and colleagues as they co-plan and co-facilitate study groups and ongoing professional learning opportunities. Provide ample opportunities for coaches and teachers to work together and share ideas, strategies and techniques to increase student engagement and improve student achievement. Respect the teacher/coach relationship that honors confidentiality and teacher support.



Instructional mentoring and coaching hold great promise as a school improvement strategy that professional consensus is beginning to endorse: timely, job-embedded assistance to teachers; professional development focused specifically on teacher and student needs; and a school culture of collaboration and continuous improvement. Mentors work with principals to help them support and make the most of instructional coaching in their schools. They help school leaders keep coaching focused, collectively problem-solve and use school data to target improvement efforts wisely and effectively. Making the necessary investments to implement this strategy well

can help us improve student performance and end the cycle of “reform du jour” that, however well intentioned, has not produced the results we all seek.

Collect data and share accountability. Shared decision making based on data and research are critical for improving practices. Coaches working with teachers to help them understand formative and summative assessments are essential for school improvement.

Provide for selection, support and stability. Implementing an instructional coaching model that promotes ongoing professional development facilitated by skilled coaches reinforces the notion that nourishing the professional growth of teachers is vital for improved student outcomes. Providing time, space and validation for coaching, mentoring and collaboration are fundamental components of school improvement.

One-on-one instructional coaching, mentoring and sustained professional development make a difference in instruction, student engagement and student learning. The clinical approach to changing instructional practices yields positive results for student learning. An effective school leader understands instructional coaching and how it impacts teaching and learning as a long-term investment designed for school improvement.

For more information, contact the author at eeisenberg@pacoaching.org.

Endnotes

¹ Supported by the Annenberg Foundation and working in partnership with the Pennsylvania Department of Education, PIIC is a statewide resource for developing and supporting consistent, high-quality instructional coaching in Pennsylvania schools. Additional support comes from PIIC's technical assistance and research team: the Penn Literacy Network; the Philadelphia Foundation; MPR Associates, Inc.; and the Academy for Educational Development. For more information, visit the PIIC web site at www.pacoaching.org.

² Pennsylvania's system of public education relies on 29 regional offices called intermediate units that provide a multitude of services and support both to school districts and to families and children within their region. Participating PIIC IUs: Allegheny, Midwestern, Northwest Tri-County, Appalachia, Seneca Highlands, Central IU, Capital Area, Luzerne, Carbon Lehigh, Delaware County. The two individual districts are Hazleton Area SD and the Eastern Lebanon SD.

³ Coaches and mentors use a specific literacy-based instructional model developed by the Penn Literacy Network, emphasizing the consistency of language and practice across all content areas; that is, teachers routinely implement literacy strategies and use language that is recognized by all students. In addition, the Pennsylvania Department of Education provides ongoing professional development around a standards-aligned system that helps prepare students with 21st-century skills.

⁴ Jake Cornett & Jim Knight. (July 2008). *Coaching Approaches and Perspectives*, (207).

⁵ Anne Rodgers Poliakoff. (September 2008). *The Role and Contribution of Mentors to the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative (PAHSCI)*. Washington D.C.: Academy for Educational Development with Assistance from Research for Action.

⁶ (October 2007). *Summary of Selected Results from the PAHSCI Teacher Survey*.